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Author(s): Joseph Gaer

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The "Jewish Problem" Myth

BY JOSEPH GAER

*Answering the contention that Jews are discriminated against
to a problematic degree in America*

WHENEVER polite people meet, their conversation, through some peculiar perversity in human nature, sooner or later is certain to reach the topic of sickness and, eventually, death. That is, if those foregathered are non-Jews. When Jews, polite or otherwise, gather in a talk-fest, much sooner than later their conversation founders on the inevitable "Jewish problem." No Gentile, however many of his "best friends are Jews," can have the faintest idea what these high-pitched discussions are like, for, by a code never uttered, this is one topic reserved by the Voice of Jacob for the Ears of Israel.

To one who has so often listened to, and sometimes participated in, these unending discussions, the most remarkable fact about them remains the untiring ferocity with which the topic is attacked; and the most irritating, that all these verbal shadow-fights are entirely about a myth as fictitious as the stork blamed for the failure of what the Bible calls "many strange inventions." And all Jews know it. By this I do not mean to imply that Jews are not faced with some very painful problems—problems which confront all minority groups dispersed among the nations. But *the*

problem, so repeatedly argued and quarreled over by Jews in America, is a peculiar piece of fiction. And as mysterious as peculiar. The "problem" is uttered as if it were second only to the Holy Name, the *Shem Ham-forosh*, and it is equally attended by a number of spiritual constellations, such as the "spiritual ghetto" and the "spiritual quota."

In her article on *Living on the Quota* in THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW for August, Carolyn Lisberger touches upon some phases of this periaptic problem, although in the very question heading her article she commits a peculiarly Hebraic sin for which her forefathers were severely, but justly, punished. It is a matter of Biblical record that when Moses (who, like Mrs. Lisberger, was a descendant of Abraham-Isaac-and-Jacob) offered his followers the Commandments, they shouted with one voice: "We shall obey and we shall listen." Were they to listen first, they might have rejected the Decalogue along with the rest of Exodus and Leviticus as, according to legend, the Scotch and Irish rejected them. Mrs. Lisberger asks: "How shall I raise my children—as Jewish, or as American? And if the answer is always 'Jewish,'

what does the word mean, how can I do it?" Were she first to define the meaning of the word "Jewish," she might have found it unnecessary to trouble her less-favored-in-the-eyes-of-the-Lord neighbors with her question.

WHEN Mrs. Lisberger, along with so many of my coreligionists, talks of a "quota system," I often find myself as puzzled as the child with his star:

Quota, quota, sinister bar—
How I wonder what you are!

For whatever may be said against them, Jews are human beings. And whatever their problems may be individually and personally, as a group the Jews in every American community are confronted with the same problems of survival and the desire to function significantly as other groups. What, then, are the limitations and restrictions suffered by the Jews in America not imposed upon other groups? In what way does official and controlling Christian power and opinion injure Jewish survival and constrict their cultural life? What is the "quota system" which "has obviously been established" for the exclusive detriment of the Jews?

The first question to consider is the limitation of numbers in actual procreation. There was a time when a foolish and wicked Pharaoh decided to put such a quota on Jewish births. Had he succeeded in enforcing his law of killing all Jewish male infants, the girls would have been forced to lose their racial identity through intermarriage with idol-worshipping Egyptians or drown themselves in the well of loneliness—in either case of which there was real danger to the Jewish race. But in no place in these United States (not even Arkansas) is there a written or

unwritten law limiting Jewish births. The growth of the Jewish population in the world does not evidence the effects of such a presumable quota. If the number of Israel is not greater today than it is, the reason will not be found in anti-Semitism but rather in the eagerness with which contemporary young Jews listen to the voice of Margaret Sanger and other prophets.

Once born, Jews must get food, clothing and shelter. Are they, in America, deprived of or restricted in their means of existence by a "quota system"? Are they in any way more restricted than Italians, Swedes, Irishmen, Yahoos, Germans, Latter-Day-Saints and other groups that constitute the American nation? Great as are the miseries of Jews Without Money, their number is only in proportion to the general poverty-stricken population. And the Jews in America who suffer from poverty, suffer from it not *because* they are Jews. In the property-less class Jews rank low in numbers. Among those few of Hebraic origin who reside in "jungles" and "ride the rods," many are merely gathering material for the reputation of a Gorky or the income of a Tully.

Nor are Jews excluded from attractive occupations by a high Christian tariff upon them. If a Jew so wishes it, he can become a farmer—and starve nobly; he can become a seaman—and starve romantically; he can become an occult philosopher and withdraw into the sand-dunes—and starve ecstatically. But Jews, being human, do not relish starvation. They have starved enough in the past, out of necessity, so when the flesh pots are again before them, the memory of forty years on such a limited diet as manna keeps their appetites whetted. For reasons too well

known to bear repetition, Jews have developed certain aptitudes in particular professions and occupations. In these they are numerous. Law, medicine, teaching, insurance, journalism, music, acting (legitimate and illegitimate), painting, tailoring, hotel-keeping, lecturing, criticism—in all these fields Jews are fairly prominent numerically. I am of the opinion that there would not be an additional Jewish physician, lawyer, journalist, etc., were the "bar sinister" against them in these varied fields abolished. For the discrimination exists only in the imagination. The reason one hears so much about it is because Jews would like to believe it exists. It helps them individually to cover their personal difficulties with the martyr-mantle of the Sorrows of Israel.

IN THE exclusively Jewish discussions of the "problem" I am often asked: "You don't mean to tell me that you do not know that Jews are blackballed in universities, particularly in some departments? You surely know that the 'No Jews Wanted' sign hangs hidden in every employment office?"

I have often heard it. But I have never found sufficient evidence to convince me. I do not for a moment doubt that there are employers who have prejudices against Jews. There are also employers who have prejudices against Japanese. Others have prejudices against Chinese. Still others would not have a Swede, or a Frenchman, or a Hindu, or an Englishman, or even a Negro work for them. I have known a nurse who claimed that she was often out of a job because people discriminated against her religion, Catholicism. Prejudices are strange things. I, for one, would not employ an Englishwoman

by birth or tradition as a children's nurse, should that, God forbid, be necessary, though I am fully aware that my prejudice is based upon the flimsiest experience with a practical nurse who was the most impractical person I have ever met, who cooked meals the smell of which alone was sufficient to discourage the most ferocious appetite, and whose clumsy handling of our child nearly gave me apoplexy. It is utterly ridiculous to judge a nation's nurses by a single example, yet the prejudice in me is deep-rooted. It therefore seems to me marvelous that there does not exist much greater prejudice against Jews about whom so many queer myths have circulated for so many centuries. No one, in fact, did more to establish the prejudice against the Jews than their own Jehovah when he told Moses, rather disgustedly: "I have had a look at these people and they are sure a stiff-necked race!" and then insisted upon having his pronouncement recorded in Exodus, XXXII:9.

The real difficulty is not so much with the prejudices as with the uses Jews make of them. I have known instances where superior men were replaced by, or rejected in preference to, inferior men. Those among the rejected who were Jews immediately raised the Lewisohn-wail. Were one to investigate the facts in the few cases I have in mind, he would have found that the rejected men, truly superior in their respective fields, had been known to trespass social tabus, and would have been rejected were they even direct descendants of George Washington.

Had Mrs. Lisberger looked about her (she had only to look across the breakfast table) she would have seen her brilliant husband who holds a very high post with a non-Jewish firm,

which, by talent and application, he undoubtedly deserves. On a clear day, which does not happen so often in San Francisco, she could have looked across the bay to the University of California, and even at that distance she could have seen that the Jews are very well represented on the faculty, beyond any imaginable "quota system." There are undoubtedly a great many more Jews and Gentiles who would like to become professors, since they have been correctly informed that, excepting for men who are doing some special research work, teaching in universities is the laziest job in creation, and, for the amount of work done, usually the best paid. Naturally the universities can not absorb all applicants. And just as naturally some of the Jewish aspirants read *Upstream* and sigh aloud.

On the other hand there are many Lucilles, Barbaras, Florences and Madeleines holding jobs, their employers not knowing whether they are Jewish or not simply because they have changed their Cohen, Levy, Levin and Shlemiel to Kohl, Leigh, deLein and McCarthy. By just looking at them one *can not* tell whether they are Jews, and they themselves, when expedient, *do not* tell. Much less unlike the rest of Americans than in appearance are the second and third generation Jews in the actual content of their lives.

MRS. LISBERGER, to indicate her deeply troubled confusion, cites the case of Dr. Michelson, whose passing Arthur Brisbane lamented with: "The death of Dr. Michelson is a loss to science and the world. His life honors his country, his family and the Jewish race." To which Mrs. Lisberger adds: "It would doubtless have surprised the renowned paragrapher to

have found Jews reading his tribute with an indulgent smile rather than a pleased smirk." There was no more reason for them to have smirked at Brisbane's tribute than that they should have smiled indulgently. Mrs. Lisberger concludes: "For the knowledge that the famous man was Jewish came as a surprise to them, so completely had his scientific interests detached him from his Semitic ones." It seems rather incredible to me that Jews were surprised that "the famous man was Jewish," for I was under the impression that the first sentence a Jewish child learns, is: "If it is famous it *must* be Jewish!" Hillel was Jewish; Jesus was Jewish; Christopher Columbus was Jewish. "A golden land, America!" Jews in Poland sighed during the Presidency of Abraham Lincoln. "Jews are free there. They even have a Jewish President, Abraham!" Then there are Charlie Chaplin (whose real name, rumor has it, is Chaayim Goldmark), Barbara Stanwyck (whose real name is Bassya Stopitzky), Greta Garbo (daughter of a Polish cantor, Garberman)—Jews all by the very fact that they are notables. Jews have not yet claimed Herbert Hoover as a coreligionist, but if he is reëlected, his family tree will undoubtedly be subjected to a rigorous reinvestigation, the Hoover-Fleishhacker alliance will be reinterpreted, and *Der Forwards* or *Die Wahrheit* will discover that President Hoover is, after all, a direct descendant of the justly renowned beadle, Moyshe Hooverman of Prague.

Whether surprised or not, there can be no doubt but that Jews would have delighted in Dr. Michelson's neglect of his scientific interests, after he earned his fame, for the participation in "Semitic ones"—to the glory of Israel. Rich

Jews would have gladly shaken his hand and slapped his back, as if to say: "It's awright, we Jews can show 'em!" And poorer ones would have pointed him out to their progeny as a symbol of the reward that comes to those who bring home a straight "A" report-card. But what are the living cultural "Semitic" forces that might have lured Dr. Michelson away from his scientific interests? Contemporary Anglo-Jewish literature is a sickly affair. Jewish art is non-existent. Jewish music wheezes out its thin sounds in the almost-empty synagogues for the benefit of old ladies rapidly growing deaf. Zionism apparently did not attract Dr. Michelson, as it does not attract many other intellectual Jews. As for Jewish religion in America—the good Lord preserve us!

It is interesting to note that religion, the major cause of Jewish persecution in the past, enjoys in America the broadest approval of Christian opinion. A synagogue-attending Jew is more favored than an atheist, an agnostic or even a convert to other faiths. Whether this friendliness toward synagogal Judaism is due to the characterlessness of Anglo-Jewish religion, the decline of religious influence in general, or the abysmal ignorance of what is commonly called "public opinion" does not here matter. The fact remains that religion, the most distinguishing mark which rubber-stamps a person as Jewish and as Kosher, rarely, if ever, enters into the complaint against the "quota system."

THE cry, "Quota, quota, sinister bar," is raised most loudly in the instance of education. Jewish "lads" clamor thirstily for knowledge, but a wicked Nordic ban keeps them within

sight but not within reach of the life-giving stream. Mrs. Lisberger claims, quite correctly, that "the finest educational and recreational resources in the country are open only to a restricted number of the Jewish group—and these on the basis of competing with each other." It is, however, equally true that the same "finest educational and recreational resources in the country are open only to a restricted number" of any group—of those who can compete with each other on the basis of wealth and social position. Though it may be true that Jews are expected to be a little richer than others to get their sons and daughters into the presumably "finest educational and recreational" institutions, they are nevertheless graded on the basis of wealth and not race. If necessary, and many of them don't wait for that eventuality, the very rich Jews join the Episcopal Church or some other socially high denomination and with one jump expect to hurdle the "quota system." And they do it not because they are ready to make a painful sacrifice so that their children could have the opportunity of a better education, as was the case with some parents in pre-revolutionary Russia, but rather to attain for themselves higher social position—in which field, I grant, there exists a very definite "quota system."

To H. L. Mencken is credited the popular story about a certain wealthy New York Jewess who joined the Episcopal Church in the hope of meeting there socially prominent Christians. When after some time she was not introduced to any members of the congregation, she complained to the minister. Graciously he invited her to his study to meet other members of his flock. When she arrived there, he introduced her: "Mrs. Arnstock, I want you to

meet Mrs. Fleishman, Mrs. Berkowitz and Mrs. Piepernoter." To which Mrs. Arnstock responded: "Oh! We've met before, I believe, in Temple Sh'erith Yisroel!"

Upon diagnosis the Jewish "problem" in America reports acute pain exactly in the spot of social position. It is a Jewish problem only in its potentialities—only in so far as all Jews hope to become rich, and many rich Jews ache with the desire to be accepted socially by rich Gentiles.

Mrs. Lisberger's example of the school in the Far West, intended to prove the opposite, really proves my point. She tells of a school that was started for the purpose of assuring growing children a preparatory school with some definite educational advantages. The application of Jewish children was apparently so great that, were they all admitted, the student body would have been essentially Jewish. "This would have acted as a boomerang," says Mrs. Lisberger. "For as soon as it became evident that the school was to be a '*succès juive*' the Nordic group would not have sought entrance, and the Jews, objecting strongly to introducing the ghetto idea in the West . . . would have withdrawn their children." Apparently the idea behind the school was

not to establish a superior educational institution for educational purposes, but a more exclusive school for the proper mixing of socially prominent little Jews with socially prominent little Nordics.

Not even by the farthest stretch of the imagination can this complicated scheming on the part of some rich Jews to gain an invitation for tea from a Crocker or to a musicale from a Tobin be considered a "Jewish" problem. The Jewish masses do not adhere to their faith in order to gain the world's respect, nor do they cast it off in order to avoid being penalized for it. The destiny of Judaism is not in the hands of those who can ask complicated questions to which there are no answers. Great social and economic forces will determine that.

Within the last century Judaism has found it necessary to seek refuge in change in a rapidly changing world. Pious Orthodoxy turned polite Conservatism and obliging Reform Judaism. The difference between the three has been summed up by a humorist as: The Orthodox Jew says, "*Nu, nu, nu?*" the Conservative Jew says, "*Nu, nu?*" and the Reform Jew says, "*Nu?*"

But already, and quite emphatically, the great majority of the younger Jewish generation prefer to say, "*Izatso?*"

